

Testimony of Jeffrey Otto on February 15, 2011 before the Public Safety Committee supporting HB6327

Members of the Public Safety Committee, my name is Jeffrey Otto, I am a former fire chief and am President of Quinebaug Valley Emergency Communications in Danielson, one of Connecticut's seven Regional Emergency Communications Centers. These Regional Centers encompass 48.5% of Connecticut's 169 towns. Our Center, whose roots are in county government, serves seventeen towns, thirty-four fire departments, fourteen ambulance organizations and three police departments in eastern Connecticut. Our rural towns benefit from the multi-frequency radio systems, advanced Computer Aided Dispatch programs, wide-area alpha paging and, most of all, the dedicated professional dispatchers that we employ. Individually no single town could afford to support such a system. Without the economies of scale that arise out of our regionalization and the subsidy of our operation from the E-911 fund these rural towns would be reduced to receiving emergency alarms and summoning volunteer responders using phones in volunteer's homes and outdoor sirens in the same way that these chores were handled in the 1940's. The subsidy, a small charge on telephone service, less than ¼ of that assessed by other states, has allowed our state to provide the infrastructure and to augment local funds as an incentive for towns to work together. This has allowed Connecticut to advance several generations in emergency communications technology.

We are now at a critical point in the rapid evolution of communications technology. Our core 911 system needs to be upgraded to deal with digital communications as part of a Next Generation 911 system. It needs to be overhauled to allow, for example, 911 dispatchers to receive and respond to input from text messages or to receive and process digital images from cell phones. Important on-scene information in the form of telematic transmissions from automobiles involved in crashes or audio clips from a caller with first-hand observations need to be processed by the 911 center and forwarded, if necessary, to responders. These system upgrades are being studied and implemented by all of the states and, if Connecticut fails to move forward, we will eventually reside in a backwater unable to exchange critical information with other states.

Connecticut has, over almost four decades of system growth and currency devaluation, finally reached the statutory subsidy limit of 50 cents per assessable line per month. The vision and leadership of this Committee and the prudent use of funds by the Office of Statewide Emergency Telecommunications has allowed Connecticut to become and remain an acknowledged leader in 911 systems at significantly lower cost to users than is the case for many other states. But with the subsidy at its limit the modernization I have just discussed cannot take place. Even in these difficult times we must have the courage and will to take those steps that towns and individuals cannot take on their own to improve public safety. Increasing the subsidy "cap" will allow the evolutionary improvement of the system and allow Connecticut to remain a leader and to provide critical benefits to its residents in this important area.

Increased emphasis on and incentives for rational regionalization can help our citizens to benefit further from improved economies of scale and should continue. But without the ability to increase charges on telephone lines to address the capital costs of increased regionalization or to pay for system infrastructure upgrades, the real benefits to Connecticut residents will never materialize. We cannot benefit from a more efficient system that is increasingly out of date. Please vote to increase the statutory cap so the 911 system can be modernized.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this proposed legislation. I would be happy to answer any questions on this matter this afternoon or at any time in the future.

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